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## To Sell Marx in North America Is To Not Sell Marx

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**Abstract** *It is argued that in order to introduce Marxist psychology into North America it is best to evade mention of Marx lest one evoke an emotional, conditioned rejection of the presentation. Enculturation into, and introjection of, anti-communist sentiments on the part of American psychologists is a barrier to reception that has to be surmounted. To do so is to approach one's audience with sound psychological principles, despite their Marxist pedigree. An examination of the work of the cellular biologist Alex Novikoff, the victim of anti-communist purges, is drawn upon as an example of how someone may present dialectical and historical materialist theory in a major North American journal--Science, have it accepted, and receive accolades for doing so. By disguising its Marxist affiliation, the soundness of the theory was afforded an audience. This, as the example proffered demonstrates, is the way to make inroads with an audience prepared for prejudice.*

As the stated purpose of this conference (Marxism & Psychology, 2010) is to “reflect on the role that Marxism can play in psychological theory, research, and practice” I have chosen to reflect on how Marxist psychology may make inroads in North America, specifically the USA, and the problems that are bound to confront it. As the title suggests, the selling of Marxist psychology in North America will be more successful if the connection to Marx is implicit rather than explicit. To be forthright with one's Marxist affiliation is likely to evoke outright rejection, without consideration, when the ontological and epistemological position may well be appealing otherwise. The ancient Chinese general Sun Tzu suggested, 2,500 years ago in *The Art of War*, “Supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting” (Tzu, 1984, p. 2). Further he counseled, “If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat” (p. 18). To gain an audience in America I believe that American resistance to the perceived evils of communism has to be breached and to do that is to address the *American ethos*—the fundamental character and values of America. I will begin there. Following that I will introduce the successful breaching of that resistance on the part of the late Alex Novikoff (1913-1987), a cellular biologist, as an indication of how the battle may be won, of how Marxist ideas may be introduced and made palatable to Americans, without invoking resistance.

### The American Ethos

That contemporary Western psychology is deeply embedded within positivistic traditions will not surprise anyone familiar with Marxist critical psychology. Nor will the fact that this is a problem that has to be confronted. As students, candidates for inclusion into the psychological community are enculturated in, and imbued with, its assumptions, such as the asocial, ahistorical nature of psychology that Danziger (1990) criticized, and with its procedures—the variable psychology that Holzkamp (1991) so derided in his *Critical Psychology*. Certainly, these must be shown to be empty, sterile, and fruitless but it is not enough to know that and to show it. An alternative must also be offered and that alternative could be a psychology based on dialectical and historical materialism. All will come to no avail for Marxist psychologists, however, in presenting their alternatives, if they do not pay heed to the cultural problems that stand in the way of historical materialist solutions being welcomed in North America.

Our starting point in this endeavor should be the sociocultural conditions within which the American psychologist is enmeshed. Historical materialism informs us that individual consciousness was based on the capacity of the brain to reflect the conditions of existence, and these conditions are socially and historically determined (Yurkovets, 1984). In the *German Ideology*, Marx and Engels, (1846, in Selsam and Martel, 1963) wrote that,

The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. (p. 190)

Individual consciousness, for Marx and Engels, reflects the socio-historical conditions in which the person is embedded.

Vygotsky (1978) developed this in his *general genetic law of cultural development*—the proposition that higher mental functions, including values and beliefs, were first interpersonal and social before they were interiorized and rendered intrapersonal. To Leont'ev (1978), too, human consciousness was embedded in social relations. This is a cornerstone of Marxist psychology. Each person develops in social-historical circumstances and these are reflected in their consciousness. This is no less true of psychologists, including American psychologists. Before they were trained in the accepted practices of mainstream, positivistic psychology, American psychologists were Americans, enculturated by, and integrated and embedded within, a system of American values. As Mead (1912), noted “Inner consciousness is socially organized by the importation of the social organization of the outer world” (P. 406). Vygotsky (1978) wrote of the cultural behavior being internalized, of the interpersonal becoming the intrapersonal. Appropriated and internalized, and continuously reinforced through ongoing social processes, these values likely become automatic in their influence and, being automatic, without consciousness, yet an influence nonetheless. According to Carpenter (1874/1896), actions that are originally under conscious direction may, in becoming habitual, be repeated involuntarily and without consciousness. In the process, one develops an *acquired* or *secondary automatism* as Hartley in the 18th century first noted. Psychical habits, as Carpenter expressed it, develop and become automatic. Mental life is conditioned and shaped by family and by custom or what we might now refer to as culture. According to Carpenter, “It is transmitted by tradition from parents to children, and it is imbibed by the latter almost unconsciously from what they see and hear around, without any special season of teaching or special persons to teach” (P. 363). One could say then that these values become instinctual (impulsive, affective, but not rational) in their operation. So what are these values?

In their book *The American Ethos*, McCloskey and Zaller (1984), pointed out that Americans have two traditional beliefs—democracy and capitalism. Democracy, as a political ideology, is intended to protect the people from inappropriate authority, like the monarchy that the American Revolution expelled. Consistent

with this is the high value Americans place on ‘freedom’ (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton, 1985). The recent debate in America over health care reform, for instance, revealed the degree of some American’s distrust of government and their rancor at any incursion of the government into their freedom, such as the freedom to have health care or not. Democracy and capitalism developed alongside each other as safeguards against monarchism, feudalism, and mercantilism (McCloskey and Zaller, 1984). The practices and values associated with capitalism are the private possession of the means of production, the pursuit of profit free from government intervention (the *laissez faire* free market economy), and a stress upon the ideal of competition as progressive. This connected well with the original Pilgrims’ *Protestant Ethic* of hard work and personal achievement, and the value of individualism, of each person being responsible for him or herself, in isolation from the larger mass. Toqueville introduced the description of 1830’s Americanism as individualism and wrote that “Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They . . . imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands” (in McCloskey and Zaller, 1984, p. 111).

A phrase which encapsulates this all was introduced by James Thurlow Adams in 1931 (Cullen, 2003) and it is a major part of the American psyche. That phrase was the ‘American Dream.’ It represented the ideal existence as one of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Cullen, 2003, p. 4). This was a life that was better, happier, and upwardly mobile, both socially and financially. It was to be achieved by competing against others for the riches that were there if one would only apply oneself. The founding fathers did not promote such competition but in the early 1800’s *laissez faire* economics and, later on, social Darwinism (which is implicit in the American ideology) gained prominence. Between 1870 and 1910, social Darwinist catchphrases like ‘survival of the fittest’ and ‘struggle for existence’ were being adopted in arguments about social policy and business practices (Hofstadter, 1944/1955).

The political economist William Sumner, a major proponent of social Darwinism, argued against socialist policies of collective welfare (Hawkins, 1997). The individual, he proposed, struggled in two arenas—against nature in terms of subsistence and socially as a struggle for existence against others. Among the business classes, this was expressed in the promotion of *laissez faire* capitalism, free market economy, and individualism (McCloskey and Zaller, 1984). Individualism allowed industrialists to justify their accumulation of wealth because of its emphasis on private achievement. Unchecked economic competition was good for business and for the individual. Let workers, as much as businesses, compete with each other. Success or failure is the responsibility of the individual and they should not seek or obtain government help if they fail to thrive. Individuals were responsible for themselves and for their families (Hawkins, 1997). Charity, as instituted politically, was a violation of that precept; it “distorted nature’s laws by shifting the burden of the struggle from some

classes on to others” (Hawkins, p. 111). The government should defend the state, liberty, justice, and the free market, but it was up to the individual to satisfy personal need. Failure to thrive was the individual’s responsibility.

Such views are seldom so explicit today. Individual rights have been gained at the expense of individual responsibility, such as with social security reforms, and yet, “Social Darwinism maintains its hold on the American mind despite the best intentions of the neo-liberals” (Knowles, 1977, p. 59). On occasion social Darwinism does achieve explicit expression. South Carolina Lt. Governor, Andre Bauer, for instance, in January of 2010, advocated not feeding the poor since they breed like dogs—referring to school lunch programs for the disadvantaged. People, he contended, as individuals, are responsible for themselves. If someone is too lazy or unfit to compete, why should the state or, more specifically, the individuals comprising the state, bear the responsibility for them.

The American ethos is an anti-communist, anti-socialist system of values. Communism, in the minds of Americans, is equated with totalitarianism, tyranny, loss of freedom, and economic failure. The politics of Marx are anathema to Americans and they have and do resist it. The high point for socialism, for instance, in the U.S.A. was 1912 (Bell, 1952) which is a date antecedent to the communist revolution in Russia. In the aftermath of the First World War (1919-1920), Americans went through a period known as the Red Scare (Coben, 1964). The American people had consented to some government control over the economy during the war period, but these were in ways that were inconsistent with the accepted value of economic individualism. This was not the only post-war, political concern of the populace. With peace, individualist values were perceived to be under threat from the proclaimed intention of the Russian Bolsheviks to export Marxist ideology. Millions of Americans feared the spread of such ideas as a threat to their liberty and their individualistic values long before the tyranny of Stalin was known to them. Communists and communism were perceived as a menace. Prior to the Second World War, 71% of the populace voted to outlaw the Communist Party (Walsh, 1947). After World War II, despite having been allies, most Americans distrusted the Soviet Union. Stalin was perceived as the embodiment of the communist ideology and he was a dictator who squashed freedom. People believed, and continue to believe, that communism was a threat to freedom and the American way of life (Schrecker, 2004). It is this atmosphere that Marxist psychology has to contend with.

I believe, given the foregoing, that any hint of a connection to Marx, on the part of advocates of Marxist approaches to psychology, is bound to invoke animosity and immediate dismissal on the part of many North American psychologists who have appropriated the *American ethos*. Any such attempt will provoke a gut-reaction of rejection. On the other hand, I also believe Americans would be receptive to the tenets of historical materialism if it was

not connected in their minds with communism. To make my case, let me share how Alex Novikoff succeeded in that regard.

## The Concept of Integrative Levels

Alex Novikoff was a cellular biologist who became a political activist during the 1930’s and who joined the Communist Party in 1935 (Holmes, 1989). He was investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938, was brought before the Rapp-Coudert Committee in 1941, and the National Institute of Health investigated his loyalty in 1973. An informant identified him as a member of the Communist Party and he was dismissed by the University of Vermont in 1953. In the midst of all this he still managed to publish two papers (Novikoff, 1945a, 1945b) that embodied Marxist principles in the prestigious journal *Science*. Not only that, he received a letter of appreciation for this work from the *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, the journal’s publishers, for his contribution’s being a significant achievement.

Novikoff’s Marxist principles were framed within the context of what he referred to as the ‘*concept of levels of integration*.’ The concept of levels of integration, he wrote, is a general description of the evolution of matter through successively higher orders of complexity and integration. It describes the progress of the evolution of matter in terms of increasing organizational complexity from the inanimate, to the animate, and, lastly, to social levels of organization. From the opening paragraph he was advocating *realism, materialism* (an implicitly dialectical materialism), and, in the transitions from inanimate to the animate to the social, the *Quantity/Quality Dialectic*. (To be clear, the laws of dialectics were not mentioned as such by Novikoff.)

The evolutionary progression that Novikoff espoused is considered to be continuous because it is a never-ending process of matter combining and recombining at greater levels of complexity. It is also concurrently discontinuous because at each new level of organization qualitatively new phenomena emerge which are not reducible to, nor explicable by, the laws of the lower level. The levels are distinct but not completely delimited from each other. One can differentiate, as Novikoff did, the physico-chemical, the biological, and the sociocultural as qualitatively different from each other, as emergent one from the other, and as having historical priority with respect to each other. Over the course of the historical evolution of matter, inanimate matter becomes animated, alive. This was the moment of the emergence of the biological level. Subsequently, the biological evolves and there emerges a new form of being, the social, and in time a new stage in the evolutionary progress is marked by the appearance of the societal/cultural. Cultural evolution is a new type of evolution. The transmission of change is social (through communication and learning) rather than biological (through reproduction). In terms of its impact on human conduct, cultural forces come to dominate the

biological in directing human action. There is a new historical progression in human conduct in terms of technological advances from stone tools to computers. This is accompanied by new forms of existence and of historical consciousness as a reflection of the changing sociocultural organization.

Even though the emergent, higher levels are distinct from the lower forms of matter they are not independent of them. The biological incorporates within it the physical and the chemical. Our bodies, beyond their organic qualities, are still composed of atoms and chemicals and are still under their influence, as with organic abnormalities due to genetic mutations produced by radiation or chemicals. At the same time, new laws become operative which transcend the physico-chemical level, such as evolution by natural selection. The same holds for the sociocultural. The chemical leaks at Bhopal India in 1984 or the Chernobyl radiation leaks of 1986 had severe consequences for the life (biological) and lifestyle (sociocultural) of the people effected. Human labor and technological developments, on the other hand, are what produced the conditions—the chemical and nuclear plants—of these disasters.

Novikoff was thus discussing, implicitly, a *unity of opposites* and the *negation of the negation* in the notion of the evolution of matter as involving both continuity and discontinuity, as well as advocating the concepts of *emergence*, and *anti-reductionism*. Speaking as a biologist, Novikoff accepted that physical and chemical forces were operative in cells; but to account for the cell in those terms alone was to miss something important that reduction to that level missed. The organization of the living cell was a new order imposed on its physico-chemical constituents. The maintenance of life through metabolism, for instance, involved the extraction of life-supporting energies through a series of chemical reactions (Keeton and Gould, 1986). Cells unlike their chemical constituents are capable of reproducing themselves and of being responsive rather than just reactive. The laws behind chemical reactions are not sufficient to explain life processes. Atomic bonding does not explain mitosis or coitus. In that regard, Novikoff wrote,

When molecules become part of a highly integrated system, protoplasm, it is important to know the properties of the molecules, but protoplasmic behavior needs description in terms and laws which have no meaning for molecules, in specifically biological terms and laws. (Novikoff, 1945a, p. 210)

Reduction of the biological to the physico-chemical would result in the loss of the biological phenomenon that it was one's intent to give an account of.

With regard to emergence and anti-reductionism, each level of integration has properties which are unique to it alone. The properties of both structure and behavior at one level, while unique, are

dependent on the properties of the constituent elements—those of the lower level—which make up the higher level. Higher level phenomena always include phenomena at lower levels. What were wholes on the lower level become parts on the higher. More than that, knowledge of the laws operating on a lower level are necessary to an appreciation of higher level laws; but these lower level phenomena cannot be used to predict what those higher level laws will be. Nor is the higher level reducible to the lower.

Social relationships are at a higher level than the biological, and of greater complexity. In human societies, in particular, qualities are present which render reduction to animal social order inadequate and deficient. Animal societies never rise above the level of the biological. Only human societies operate in accordance with the laws of societal and cultural phenomena (economics, politics, sociology, psychology, semiotics, and so on). Human behavior differs from that of animals due to a different morphological structure, such as the developed brain and hand, and behaviors involving thought, speech, and labor. (Unknown to Novikoff, recent research into comparative psychology no longer excludes thought, speech and labor as a rudimentary developments in some species—see Bonner, 1980; Byrne, 1995.) Unlike animal behavior, human behavior is governed by changing technological forces, and by changing forms of social and cultural relations. In fact, cultural and socioeconomic forces dominate biological factors in directing human action.

Human social behavior is operative at a level that is above that of biological functioning. Relative to sociocultural change, biological change has remained essentially unchanged and, what change has occurred, resulted from social development rather than causing it. According to Washburn (1959), “Biological changes in the hand, brain and face follow the use of tools, and are due to the new selection pressures which tools created” (p. 31). That is as true of our evolutionary past as of our ontogenetic present. “Our brains,” as Doidge, (2007) pointed out, “are modified by the cultural activities we do—be they reading, studying music or learning new languages” (p. 288). Cultural activities determine neuroplasticity. As a result, any reduction of the social to the biological would be greatly amiss. Novikoff's whole treatment of the social, while not made explicit, is clearly consistent with *Historical materialism*.

Many Marxist principles were presented by Novikoff in his paper on levels. Not only were these principles not spotted, the paper was hailed as an important achievement. All this was in spite of the close scrutiny he was under as a suspected communist. Novikoff had an effective strategy that may be a prescription for future attempts to circumvent the irrational defences erected by indoctrination.

## A Final Point

Having made the case that Novikoff has pointed a way to intro-

duce Marxist thinking to a North American audience, I want to close on one further American belief that can be worked on with profit—that of *exceptionalism*. This is the idea that the United States of America is unique in its history and in its destiny (Kammen, 1993; Tyrell, 1991). Exceptionalism has led Americans to the belief that America has as its mission the spreading of its values to the rest of the world (Agnew, 1987). This suggests to me a further strategy.

American psychologists, such as John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, James Mark Baldwin, Gordon Allport, and others, have independently espoused ideas that are consistent with dialectical and historical materialism. Their work can be built upon and developed. The idea of exceptionalism leads Americans to value what is American over all else, and notions that appear to be American in origin will likely be more attractive and palatable than those that are foreign.

In conclusion, then, to bluntly affront the American psychologist's psyche with what they may intuit as offensive and un-American is not likely to be an effective strategy, in the selling of Marxist psychology. One must present them with ideas that would be appealing if only they were stripped of the 'sign stimuli' (the Marxist terminology) that elicit conditioned responses of rejection.

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