

An essay by Abigail Reinbold

## *Mad Studies Avec Marxism*

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On a first glance it may seem that the Mad Pride and Mad Studies movements have little to do with the theory and practice of Marxism (dialectical and historical materialism). In their development of the materialist conception of history with all its emphasis on the means and relations of production, on commodity fetishism, and Primitive accumulation, it seems at first that Marx, Engels, and their intellectual descendants would have little to say about the fundamental issues at the heart of Mad Studies (A Central emphasis on experiential knowledge, an epistemic decentering of professional authority, standpoint analysis, day to day manifestations of interpersonal and systemic sanism, identity-making in opposition to hegemonic power, etc.). And if we look merely to the text of Marx and Engels themselves, this would be a well-justified contention, they really do not talk much at all about mad, neurodivergent, and disabled people or the suppression thereof. But dialectical and historical materialism are not religious doctrines, and Marx and Engels are not church fathers with an exclusive claim to the interpretation of the holy texts. Marxism is a scientific method for the politico-economic, historical, and ideological analysis of class society from a partisan class-perspective. Most importantly, any truly systematic application of Marxism requires that the theoretical tenets of dialectical and historical materialism be applied, stretched, and shifted in accordance with the specific material conditions faced by those trying to apply it.

There is a long tradition now of Marxist and Leninist thinkers who have performed such a specific material analysis of the class societies in which they lived. Vladimir Lenin, a leading

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figure in the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Bolshevik) famously changed the classical Marxian saying of “working men of the world, unite!” to “working class and oppressed people of the world, unite!”. In the material conditions of the autocratic Russian Empire, a prison-house of oppressed minority nationalities made subject to both military and economic violence, where neither women nor men had the right to vote and where femininity was often seen as synonymous with domestic servitude, the Leninist reformulation of Marx was a more accurate and more effective refrain - declaring to ALL the people suffering under the boot of Tsarist absolutism that Marxist politics were not merely concerned with the conditions of the urban proletariat, who anyways made up a vast minority of the people with the exception of a few large cities, but that Marxist revolutionaries sought the total liberation of the people from every possibility of exploitation, domination, and oppression.

Lenin is just one example of an interpreter of Marxism who applied materialist dialectics to those systems of exploitation not fully grappled with by the work of Marx and Engels. Revolutionary theorists like Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, Sam Marcy, Sylvia Federici, Angela Davis, Larry Holmes, Leslie Feinberg, and Gerald Horne have further illuminated how Imperialism, Colonialism, White Supremacy, and Cis-heteropatriarchal regimes of social reproduction form the essential infrastructure of Capitalist hyper-exploitation and oppression. Whereas before it might have been said that the Marxian theory of Primitive Accumulation had been left incomplete, except for perhaps in Marx’s more obscure writings and notebooks known mostly only by scholars, we now have a plethora of texts effectively tracking the bloody emergence and development of global capitalism in great detail. This historical literature has made two facts incredibly clear:

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First, that Marx was correct when he said that “Primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology” - that the wealth in those societies where the capitalist mode of production prevails was originally generated and continues to be reproduced through incredible violence, expropriation, dislocation, and exclusion. These interlocking systems of exploitation and domination are not peripheral to Capitalist accumulation, **they form the very core of it** (*A Dying Colonialism, 1959; Neo-Colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism, 1965; High Tech Low Pay: A Marxist Analysis of the Changing Character of the Working Class, 1986; Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come, 1992; Are Prisons Obsolete, 2003; Caliban and the Witch, 2004; Marxism, Reparations, and the Black Freedom Struggle, 2005; Freedom is a Constant Struggle, 2015; The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism, 2018; Patriarchy of the Wage, 2021*).

Secondly, that the struggle against global capitalism today can only be fought through a relentless effort against every possibility of exploitation, domination, and oppression - Not in the very simple sense that “we are all in this together, there is only one struggle, the struggle against global capitalism”, which paints over the particularities of the struggles faced by oppressed peoples by absorbing them into the final battle against capitalist oppression - but in the sense that we must attend to the particularities of each struggle in our systematic analysis and link up in solidarity with oppressed peoples in order to have a chance in hell at finally overcoming, abolishing, **sublating** this wretched system which feeds off the blood and sweat and misery of the people.

This brings us, naturally, to the question of Mad liberation, Mad Pride, and Mad Studies. It goes without saying that there has been significant overlap, both in theory and in practice, between Mad activists/scholars and Marxists. In *Therapists Are Cops*, at least four of the authors

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that I cite are either Mad scholars who are significantly influenced by dialectical and historical materialism or Marxists engaging actively with Mad studies (Here I am referring to Beresford, Cohen, Mason, and Moore but I suspect there are others in the bibliography I may be unaware of). These activists and scholars have simultaneously recognized the need for the abolition of capitalism and for the centering of Mad people's dignity, autonomy, and ultimately liberation in their work. At the level of social movements, these insights have been hard won victories, born of political practice in the Disability Justice and Mad Liberation movement. Principled workers parties and mass organizations must follow suit! Only a handful of Workers parties here in North America have internal disability caucuses or bring their cadre out in solidarity with movements for Disability Justice, even less are willing to go beyond empty phrases for Mad Liberation. Such a program of reforms does not just mean fighting against sanism within our own organizations, but centering the perspectives and knowledge of Mad people in our own political analyses and practice, showing active solidarity with progressive movements seeking Mad liberation by helping to organize and bring bodies to the struggle, agitating around demands to smash the carceral state in all of its forms - including asylums. It means that we self-proclaimed Revolutionaries have a lot of work to do that must begin sooner rather than later both internally through political education and externally through solidarity-building, mass work, and agitation.

Marxism needs Mad Studies and Mad Studies urgently needs the kind of razor sharp material and historical analysis that Marxism provides to move beyond the event-horizon of liberal and reformist approaches, which merely amend the practices of psychiatric institutions without eliminating the coercive, pathologizing, and profit-driven forms that constitute their everyday existence. It is only by identifying the roots of sanist oppression in the commodification of everything, even human bodies and minds, that we can identify how socialist

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forms of social organization are a necessary precondition to ending the institutionalization of the deviant and the supposedly “non-productive”. The emergence of Psychiatric Hegemony as a near all-encompassing form of ruling class Ideology is almost unintelligible as a historical process if we do not properly grapple with the objective economic and political interests of those psy-professionals, insurance agencies, and politicians who were the primary drivers of that process.

Marxism with Mad Studies, Mad Studies Avec Marxism, to attempt to link these fields theoretically in the terms of a structural and historical analysis, that is the basic thrust underlying *Therapists Are Cops*. By drawing heavily from these two traditions in my attempts to analyze the historical development of the Psy-Professions in the U.S. during the mid to late 20th Century, my intention has been to reveal the connections between systems and actors motivated simultaneously towards the perpetuation of both sanist oppression and capitalist domination, though I am almost certain they would not frame their own actions and ideas in such a manner. This is the positive function of ruling class Ideology, beyond mere “false consciousness” which obfuscates “true reality”, that this Ideology is already objectified on the side of material reality in the Systemic and Symbolic forms which function to perpetuate and justify the antagonistic class society that gave birth to them:

“The illusion is not on the side of knowledge, it is already on the side of reality itself, of what the people are doing. What they do not know is that their social reality itself, their activity, is guided by an illusion, by a fetishistic inversion. What they overlook, what they misrecognized, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity”.

(Slavoj Zizek - *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 1989)