Marxism, psychology and the Bulger case

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Since publishing Arthur Merton’s article on the outcome of the James Bulger murder trial Workers’ Power’s letters page has been deluged with responses. We have been able to print only a few of these. Here Jack Tully responds on behalf of the Workers Power Editorial Board

The murder of Jamie Bulger shocked millions of people. Everywhere, people asked the same question: why?

The answer to this question is not simple and, as the debate in Workers Power’s letters page shows, people with similar political points of view can advance radically different answers.

In our original article on the subject (173, December 1993) we argued that the event was “an aberration, a qualitatively different viciousness that defies pat explanations” and that the answer as to why the two boys killed James Bulger “lies deep in the psyche of the killers themselves.”

In the following months we were accused of “a complete abandonment of Marxism”, of advancing “a view more akin to lapsed Catholicism than Marxism” in an article which was “at odds with Marxism, historical materialism and indeed materialism itself.”

The discussion raises important questions about the relationship between Marxism, psychology and science in general.

Marxists are materialists. We think that all phenomena, including the movements of social classes and the behaviour of individuals, can be explained by material factors which obey certain objective laws.

These “laws” are not simply invented by scientists. They correspond to the way in which matter moves and interacts. It is the job of scientists and Marxism itself is an attempt to think scientifically about society to formulate these laws as accurately as possible.

Social
Marxism is the science of social development. Psychology is the science of individual behaviour. Yet human beings are “social animals” their individual behaviour can only take place in a social context.

Two different and opposing conceptions of human behaviour have generally been advanced through the ages. On the one hand there is the idea that we behave the way we do because of “original sin”, “nature” or “genetic determinism”. On the other hand there are explanations focusing on “upbringing”, “nurture” or “environmental factors”.

The Marxist starting point in trying to overcome this bald contradiction is that the human mind or psyche is composed of matter. It consists of electrical signals in the brain. The nerves which carry these messages are assembled in a particular way, a complex interaction of genetic “programming” and the effects of experience. But the chemical and neurological laws governing the way in which we are “wired” cannot, in
Of course, some behaviour can be explained and predicted by particular physico-chemical or biological laws. You drink alcohol?you behave stupidly?you fall down.

But in general we need richer explanations of human behaviour, explanations which deal with human beings not just as a walking collection of nerves and chemicals but as social beings, interacting with each other and the world, developing according to certain contradictory laws.

If we want to understand the society which produced James Bulger?s murderers, with its child abuse and poverty, its two-faced attitude to children?s rights and responsibilities, its lurid video nasties and its moralising bigots, only Marxism will suffice.

If we want to understand the particular effect of that society on the children?how the institution of the ?bourgeois family? was mediated through the actual families of James Bulger?s murderers?we cannot rely on Marxism?s understanding of society?s laws alone.

We have to grasp the reality of individual behaviour through a dialectical materialist psychology.

In the development of psychology, a massive step forward was made in the late nineteenth century by Freud. Freud allowed us to glimpse the possibility that human beings do not only behave according to simple material rules governed by their emotional states or their social conditions. They might also behave according to more complex and unseen rules, perhaps relating to the nature of the family and the way in which the growing child relates to its parents, the imposition of discipline and so on.

These factors, Freud claimed, take the form of unconscious forces or structures. They cannot be directly observed but can be deduced on the basis of close observation of the behaviour of the individual.

Another attempt at a materialist explanation of human behaviour was made by the Russian psychologist Pavlov, in the early years of this century. Pavlov?s famous research, on the changing behaviour of dogs under different external stimuli, formed the basis for an explanation of the behaviour of in human beings.

Controversy still rages over the merits of the psychoanalytic and behavioural approaches laid down by Freud and Pavlov respectively.

Here is what Trotsky, one of the few great Marxists to write about psychology, had to say on the subject:

?Pavlov?s re?exology proceeds entirely along the paths of dialectical materialism. It conclusively breaks down the wall between physiology and psychology. The simplest re?ex is physiological, but a system of re?exes gives us ?consciousness?. The accumulation of physiological quantity gives a new ?psychological? quality . . . ?

Freud

?The school of the Viennese psychoanalyst Freud proceeds in a different way. It assumes in advance that the driving force of the most complex and delicate of psychic processes is a physiological need. In this general sense it is materialistic if you leave aside the question whether it does not assign too big a place to the sexual factor at the expense of others . . . But the psychoanalyst does not approach problems of consciousness experimentally, going from the lowest phenomena to the highest, from the simple re?ex to the complex re?ex; instead he attempts to take all these intermediate stages in one jump . . . from the religious myth, the lyrical poem or dream, straight to the physiological basis of the psyche?. (Trotsky, Culture and Socialism 1926)
Trotsky’s purpose here was to show that:
- different scientific methods can grasp elements of the same reality
- they do not have to be subjectively Marxist. The best objective science will spontaneously approximate to the dialectical materialist method
- Marxism doesn’t reject Freudianism just because of its conjectural and primarily individually-oriented method of analysis
- whilst there can be a Marxist, materialist judgement made about psychology’s methods and conclusions, there can be no party line on them. Some Communist Party members had argued in favour of banning Freudianism from the USSR’s scientific establishment.

Trotsky returned to this theme in his notebooks in the 1930s, emphasising again that:

- By itself the method of psychoanalysis, taking as its point of departure the autonomy of psychological phenomena [from the physiological], in no way contradicts materialism. Quite the contrary, it is precisely dialectical materialism that prompts us to the idea that the psyche could not even be formed unless it played an autonomous, that is, within certain limits, an independent role in the life of the individual and the species? (Notebooks 1933-35)

At the same time Trotsky was prepared to criticise vigorously every attempt by psychology to provide its own pat explanations of social phenomena. Much of sham Freudianism, he wrote, has nothing to do with science and merely expresses decadent moods. And he devoted a whole article to attacking Pavlov’s attempt to explain not merely individual behaviour but society’s development in terms of physiological reflexes (Science in the Task of Socialist Construction, 1923)

What does all this mean for our attempts to understand the Bulger case, and for the arguments raised in letters to Workers Power?

The gutter press screamed that the two boys were evil bastards and thus repeated the argument of medicine-men, exorcists, religious bigots and reactionaries down the ages.

Other press pundits claimed the boys’ behaviour was the direct result of one material influence watching the horror video Child’s Play III. The Tory right lined up behind this argument, and the original Workers Power article was focused against their pro-censorship conclusions.

We can accept Colin Lloyd’s argument (WP175) that the article overemphasised this point, failing to take on the evil bastards’ argument, and sweepingly applied the notion of a simple aberration to other shocking crimes.

On the other hand, two readers argued that distinctly social reasons can explain why James Bulger was killed.

Gerry Downing claims that the cause was the disturbed and decaying social relations in the capitalist society as a whole. Quentin Rudland writes that at least one of the two murderers had probably been severely abused by an adult.

These are attempts to provide a materialist explanation. Unfortunately, merely because a theory attempts to root itself in material factors does not mean it is right.

In this particular case, these explanations do not help us one bit. This is not the first phase of decay in capitalist relations, nor is Liverpool the hardest-hit place on the face of the planet, and yet the Bulger case was so striking because it was so unusual. Similarly, many children are abused. Virtually none of them kill
other children.

Despite their best intentions, Downing and Rudland only proved that their explanations are not sufficient. It is obviously the case that neither child abuse nor capitalist decay are adequate explanations because they cannot explain the particularity of this case.

Both contributors make reference to Freud in support of their arguments. As Rudland suggests, the early Freud discovered the material evidence of widespread sexual abuse of children and linked it to adult psychological disorders. But under the pressure of public opinion Freud changed his explanation, emphasising childhood fantasies, as opposed to the actual experience of abuse, as the roots of psychosis.

A materialist critique of Freud must take account of this massive, ideologically motivated retreat from scientific truth. But it does not invalidate the consideration of aberrant behaviour from the point of view of the individual human psyche. As Trotsky pointed out it is precisely dialectical materialism which allows us to consider the psyche playing:

?an autonomous, that is, within certain limits, an independent role in the life of the individual and the species?.

So why did these two boys kill James Bulger?

If we are true to Trotsky?s method we have to admit we do not know the full answer. That does not mean that the answer is unfathomable. But Marxists do not pretend to have a monopoly of insight into the motivation of two genuinely abnormal children.

This is not an ?abandonment of Marxism? or an example of ?lapsed Catholicism?. It is a refusal to follow the gutter press and leap upon the ?rst explanation which comes to hand?either innate evil or susceptibility to trashy horror ?lms.

It will require scienti?c study, probing the psyche of the two boys concerned and all the factors?social and biological?which produced those two boys to fully understand the crime.

Some of that study has already begun, with journalists Gitta Sereny and David Smith producing separate accounts of the children and their families. In both accounts we ?nd unmistakable signs of neglect and suggestions of sexual abuse in the case of one of the perpetrators, but also suggestions that the behavioural problems of another arose from his chronic hyperactivity.

Being

All of this should warn Marxists against any attempts at ?pat explanations?. Marxists?including some of the writers to the letters page?quote Marx, who argued that ?being determines consciousness?. This is undoubtedly true, but needs to be understood in its fullest, most dialectical fashion.

?Being??our existence, our nature?does not only refer to our immediate or past social experience. Humans are social animals; that is, we have a material, social nature. Our physical nature is refracted through the experience of society.

There is no barrier between Marxism and psychology. Indeed self-consciously dialectical thought is the best guarantee of accurate results in psychology and any other science. But Marxists, even if armed with the general truth that ?being determines consciousness?, have no monopoly on scienti?c truth. They have no right simply to counterpose their own armchair psychology to that of the bosses? media pundits.