

Marxism and Oppression

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■ The struggle to end all forms of oppression has always been central to Marxist ideas and socialist activism. Marxists and socialists always have been and are at the forefront of every struggle against oppression. This is true of the past and it is also true of today, from Repeal and the struggle for women's equality; to ending direct provision and discrimination faced by refugees and migrants; to opposing imperialist wars and building solidarity with Palestinians; to fighting for legal recognition of Travellers and an end to discrimination; to opposing Unionism's regime of discrimination in the North that led to the 'Troubles'; and to the struggle for Marriage Equality, gender self recognition and the elimination of homophobia, to name a few.

As Marxists, we want to understand why oppression exists; how it impacts people and shapes society; how we can challenge it; and, ultimately, how to end all forms of oppression. Marxists have developed their understanding of oppression over many decades and by incorporating insights of those influenced by other radical traditions.

Marxists have long acknowledged people in society face 'special' forms of oppression alongside and beyond class oppression. Marxists have attempted to analyse and grasp the phenomenon of how multiple forms of oppression fuse into one experience of 'overlapping oppressions', 'interlocking oppressions' or the 'intersection' of forms of oppression.

Oppression is experienced on an interpersonal and a systemic level. For example, most women who are sexually assaulted know their attacker. This oppression is violently experienced through interpersonal contact and relationships. The fact that the justice system often re-victimises survivors of sexual assault, the media

often blames women for their own sexual assault, and convictions and sentences for sexual assaults are notoriously lenient all are examples of institutional women's oppression. However, to understand why sexual assault is a systemic issue - one that is experienced interpersonally and institutionally, Marxists seek to analyse the root causes of different forms of oppression and how they manifest themselves in society today.

There are a variety of political analyses attempting to comprehend where oppression comes from, how it persists and what to do about it. Some argue the oppression that different groups experience is caused by all people who are part of the 'oppressor group', for example all white, cisgender, able bodied men. Some assert individual women must learn to 'lean in'. Others argue that a Marxist understanding of oppression subverts it to the class struggle.

Oppression generally refers to the many forms of discrimination, violence and bigotry faced by particular groups based upon gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, religion, ability, or some other factor. Oppression is codified in law, such as abortion or equal marriage being illegal or immigration quotas that favored immigrants from one country over another. Oppression is institutionalised through policies such as discriminatory housing allocation to Traveller families, or benefit cuts to those unfit to work, which discriminates against people with disabilities. Oppression is reinforced by the media with programmes such as 'My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding' or headlines like 'Europe under threat by terrorists posing as migrants'. Oppression is also experienced daily through homophobic, sexist, racist and bigoted language and violence. Different forms of oppression are deeply rooted in society and directly

impact people's lives.

However, though specific groups face particular forms of oppression, the working class as a whole is oppressed under capitalism. The working class is a subjugated class. A minority ruling class controls society and exploits the working class majority. Capitalism is a system of exploitation, whereby a minority owning class extract and control surplus value created by workers through their labour. Further, workers are alienated by their labour because the work we do is not controlled by us and is not owned by us.

Oppression doesn't originate from bad ideas in people's heads but from the material conditions of class society. Oppression predates capitalism, but does not pre-date class society, since the purpose of oppression is to keep the wealth of society in the hands of a ruling elite. The relationship between specific forms of oppression faced by groups of people and exploitation of the entire working class is complex but inextricably linked. Oppression and exploitation in class society have always co-existed; class exploitation could not function without oppression. The existence of oppression makes it easier to dehumanise some groups in society in order to exploit the entire working class majority. It is impossible to be liberated from oppression under the capitalist system and it is impossible to overthrow capitalism without fighting against all forms of oppression.

In the *Communist Manifesto* Karl Marx and Frederick Engels described how the struggle against oppression has been central to human history:

'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles... Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.'

However, the working class majority cannot all be oppressed equally, or else their common interest to overthrow the ruling class would be too apparent. Different groups within the working class are treated differently and have different experiences. Oppression of certain groups is necessary in order to exploit the working class as a whole, and, therefore, is essential for

capitalism. The impact of this is to divide the working class within itself. So, for the working class majority to achieve unity, there must be a struggle within the working class against the forms of oppression that allow a tiny minority to rule. There must be active solidarity for the struggle of oppressed groups to achieve equality.

One of the first forms of oppression Marx and Engels studied and wrote about was national oppression. They saw the ways in which Irish workers were oppressed because they were Irish within British factories – how the British chauvinism that was encouraged and stoked within the British working class was used to turn workers against each other and mask the real oppressor – the British ruling class. The patriotism of the colonising nation coincided with the expansion of colonisation, imperialism and war.

Marx and Engels wrote:

'Every industrial and commercial center in England now possesses a working class divided into two hostile camps, English proletarians and Irish proletarians. The ordinary English worker hates the Irish worker as a competitor who lowers his standard of life. In relation to the Irish worker he feels himself a member of the ruling nation and so turns himself into a tool of the aristocrats and capitalists of his country against Ireland, thus strengthening their domination over himself. He cherishes religious, social, and national prejudices against the Irish worker. His attitude toward him is much the same as that of the "poor whites" to the "niggers" in the former slave states of the USA. The Irishman sees in the English worker at once the accomplice and the stupid tool of the English rule in Ireland. This antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified by the press, the pulpit, the comic papers, in short, by all the means at the disposal of the ruling classes. This antagonism is the secret of the impotence of the English working class, despite its organisation. It is the secret by which the capitalist class maintains its power. And that class is fully aware of it.'

Anti-Black racism was institutionalised as capitalism took hold and expanded. Racism is inextricably intertwined with capitalist development. Marx himself was a staunch abolitionist and explained slavery's role in the origins of capitalism: 'The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the indigenous population

of that continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production.

Frederick Douglass, former slave and abolitionist, wrote about how racism was used to 'divide both to conquer each.' And Marx asserted that "Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin when in the Black it is branded."

Slavery was overthrown by the massive rebellion of slaves and the Civil War in the United States but racism continued. Capitalism is extremely flexible in its ability to adapt to new conditions, as is oppression. When slavery ended the US state used the Black Codes and later Jim Crow laws to segregate, disempower, and oppress freed slaves, while at the same time created laws that compelled them to work. The slave driver was replaced by the lynch mob. The slave catcher with the police force.

Racism is alive and well in the United States because the institutions that hold up US capitalist society continue to be racist to the core. This is why police can kill Black people on the streets and not be charged. This is why Black people are disproportionately incarcerated. This is why schools in Black neighbourhoods are horribly underfunded, closing, heavily policed and over-crowded. This is why 50 years after the Civil Rights Act, there is still defacto segregation across every city in the US. This is why Black wealth is a fraction of white wealth.

Women's oppression found its origin in class society. In the transition from hunter gatherer societies to agricultural societies, for the first time in human history there was a surplus of food stuffs, and later a system of controlling it gave way to class division. Friedrich Engels in his book *Origins of the Family, State and Private Property* called the emergence of class division as the world historic defeat of women. What he meant by this is that women were relegated to an oppressed class as soon as family units mattered for distribution of private property, and women's bodies were controlled as vessels for the reproduction of the family line and of property.

Under capitalism, women's oppression is crucial for the reproduction and the maintenance of the source

of all wealth in society – the worker. In order for the capitalist system to work, it is completely dependent on extracting surplus value from workers. However, workers need to be able to labour. The location of the procreation and raising of future workers, the feeding, clothing and socialising of current workers, and the care of those who are unable to work, either because of age or disability, is in the privatised individual family. The vast majority of the labour that is required to keep the working class functioning and ensure the flow of future generations of workers falls on the shoulders of women. James Connolly aptly captured these dynamics when he wrote over one hundred years ago: "The worker is the slave of capitalist society, the female worker is the slave of that slave'.

Therefore, any fight against women's oppression has to be based on transforming the family, by removing its material necessity. Innessa Armand, a leader of the Russian Revolution and head of the women's bureau, wrote: "As long as the old forms of the home life are not abolished, it will be impossible to destroy exploitation and enslavement. It will be impossible to build socialism." Any struggle for the socialisation of care – be it for universal free healthcare, for free and accessible education from primary through to third level education, for collective laundries and kitchens, for free childcare, full well-paid maternity and family leave, for elder care for all who need it, and for fully funded care and programming for people who are unable to work – is a fight against the oppression of women.

Like women's oppression, LGBT oppression is also rooted in the ways in which capitalism needs the family to reproduce and maintain workers. John D'Emilio explains the contradictions within the family and a more industrialised society where individualism is encouraged materially through wages and ideologically: "Capitalism continually weakens the material foundation of family life, making it possible for individuals to live outside the family, and for a lesbian and gay male identity to develop. On the other hand, it needs to push men and women into families, at least long enough to reproduce the next generation of workers. The elevation of the family to ideological preeminence guarantees that a capitalist society will reproduce not just children, but heterosexism and homophobia."

No one encapsulated the experience of facing multiple

oppressions better than abolitionist and women's rights activist Sojourner Truth in the extemporaneous speech she gave at a women's convention in 1851. Her experience as a woman and a former slave shaped the way she experienced oppression and her approach to combating it:

"That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?"

At the time, many middle class white women within the feminist movement were either actively racist or succumbed to racism because they feared the women's movement would be supplanted by the abolitionist movement. This same dynamic exists today when struggles against different forms of oppression are pitted against each other, and not against their common oppressor - the ruling class.

Moreover, not all people in oppressed groups experience oppression equally. For example, a wealthy woman deals with the difficulty of raising children and keeping their house differently than poor women. Namely, she can hire childminders or house cleaners; or she can choose to not also work for a wage as she is raising children. Whereas many working class women do not have this choice, as they are forced to work for a wage to pay for the subsistence of her family.

Across Ireland and the world, there is a new awakening to and challenge to oppression and inequality. The old maxim of the Wobblies "an injury to one is an injury to all" best reflects the Marxist approach to fighting oppression. We are in solidarity with the struggles of all the oppressed and we are out to fight for liberation for all. Fighting oppression weakens the ability of the ruling class to divide and conquer and in turn weakens ruling class power. Fighting against exploitation entails unifying the exploited and oppressed working class

majority. Conversely, the oppression of one section of society reinforces the power of the ruling class to oppress and exploit the class as a whole.

Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin made the case in 'What Is To Be Done?' that socialists should aim to be "*the tribune of the people*, who is able to react to every manifestation of tyranny and oppression, no matter where it appears, no matter what stratum or class of the people it affects; who is able to generalise all these manifestations and produce a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; who is able to take advantage of every event, however small, in order to set forth *before all* his socialist convictions and his democratic demands, in order to clarify for *all* and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat."

It is the role of socialists to fight against all forms of oppression and to argue to broaden solidarity as much as possible. Marxism rests on the premise that the working class will only be liberated from oppression and exploitation by our own self-activity. In order to build the power necessary to challenge the whole rotten system, we need to build a political movement of the working class that takes on the divide and conquer tactics and ideology of the ruling class and wrests power into our own hands once and for all.